BLUE MOUNTAIN SUBDIVISION

PRE-APPLICATION REVIEW

COMMENTS OF THE FIVE VALLEYS AUDUBON SOCIETY

During the past ten years, Five Valleys Audubon Society has offered comment on land development proposals moving through Missoula's subdivision review process. Our interest in doing so is to reduce the impact of such activity on areas having valued avian habitat. In pursuing this objective, we try to be engaged in the earliest phases of subdivision review. By doing so, we seek to offer comment on the habitat values of a site and suggest means to mitigate impacts of a prospective development. In the end, we are hopeful that developers will then seek to integrate our suggestions into their ultimate plan of development.

It is likely that, at one time, land encompassed by the proposed Blue Mountain Subdivision had value as grassland wildlife habitat. However, extensive human activity on a large portion of the land has reduced the importance of any such habitat. That being the situation, we do not see where development on that portion of the property would be in conflict with our resource protection objectives.

There is, however, a grassland area along the northeast portion of the property that generally remains undisturbed and extends to the adjoining irrigation canal. Scattered across the grassland are a few Ponderosa pine trees and such woody shrubs as Douglas hawthorn. Bird species we would expect to encounter within this vegetation type include Yellow Warblers, Lazuli Buntings, Calliope Hummingbirds and foraging raptors. Along with its habitat value, this area has served as a buffer between mechanized activity on the property and bird use on the canal and grassland in the floodplain.

The irrigation canal comprises created habitat where waterfowl may rest and forage for aquatic vegetation and invertebrates. Species found on the waterway include Wood Ducks, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal, and Mallards. Three years ago, an extremely rare bird to the United States, a Baikal Teal, was observed on the canal. It was the first confirmed Montana sighting of a bird species that spends summers in Siberia and winters throughout Japan, China and Korea.

An important way to limit the impact of increased human presence in an area is to have adequate open space between wildlife habitat and adjoining land development activity. The current subdivision plan envisions three lots extending across the grassland and to the canal. Human activity would be evident from the canal since homes for those lots are shown to be on or near the slope portion of the grassland. Further, and although each lot contains a 100-foot irrigation setback, it's not clear if the setback is a no-build zone and what activity might be allowed. Regardless, activity within the lots could be at the discretion of three individual landowners. With this situation, there is little assurance that the purpose of having any open space buffer would be realized.

We would suggest that any land development activity be moved away from the grassland and its slope area. This would be much like the homes we see on land adjoining the proposed subdivision. We would also advocate having the grassland designated a common area. Shared ownership and management would better protect the values inherent with having undeveloped land adjoining the irrigation canal. Changes of this nature would not eliminate impacts to the resident bird population, but they would help reduce their severity.

Our conservation efforts largely focus on lands containing critical and limited habitat, particularly where species of conservation concern are involved. The avian resource that would be affected by the Blue Mountain subdivision does not rise to that level of concern. Yet, the irrigation canal plays

a role in the yearly life of various waterfowl species. Its value is enhanced by the proximity of the Maclay Flats Nature Trail and the Bitterroot River. As now conceived, the prospective subdivision development would diminish that value. Extending lots into the grassland habitat adjoining the canal would reduce present avian use of that area. Also, conditions needed to help buffer subdivision activity and current waterfowl use of the canal would be lost.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment at this early stage of planning and review for the subdivision. If you should wish any further information or clarification regarding our comments, please feel free to contact either Jim Brown (brownjs2@bresnan.net) or Gerhard Knudsen (gmk@bresnan.net).